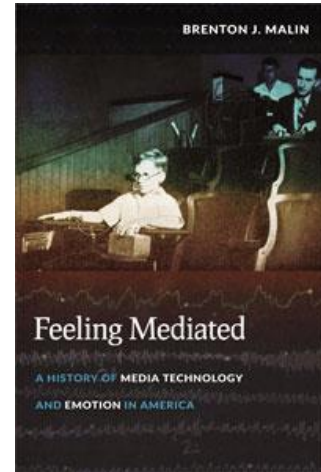


Brenton J. Malin, **Feeling Mediated: A History of Media Technology and Emotion in America**, New York University Press, 2014, 309 pp., \$25.00 (paperback).

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Emotive technologies supply U.S. popular culture with material on a regular basis. From Fritz Lang's mischievous robot Maria in *Metropolis* to Steven Spielberg's loving human prototype David in *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*, these "feeling machines" draw on the sublime powers of new technologies, which are both fascinating and terrifying. Today, we communicate with new technology daily, whether it be asking Siri for a restaurant suggestion on our iPhone or shouting at the GPS navigator when it guides us onto a closed road. On one hand, connecting with technology makes life easier, but on the other there is something especially eerie about getting into an emotional screaming match with an electronic device.



In ***Feeling Mediated: A History of Media Technology and Emotion in America***, author Brenton J. Malin demonstrates how this connection has been building for well over a century:

Feeling Mediated investigates how thinking about emotion intersects with thinking about technology, focusing primarily on an intellectual and rhetorical framework established during the early 20th century that continues to stand in the way of larger social understandings of mediated emotion. I call this perspective media physicalism. (p. 20)

Malin draws on the philosophical definition of the word "physicalism" to explain it as a "person's conscious experiences equivalent to a set of physical reactions in the body" (p. 21). Or in other words, media's direct effect on the receiver's emotions. Peter Stearns' research on the history of emotion plays a key role in the author's work throughout the book.

Using a wide range of archival research and several historical examples of technology's relationship to emotion, Malin demonstrates how communication technology changed the way people think about emotion and continues to. He presents concerns surrounding this influence and demonstrates how it has negatively affected our connections with one another. Malin, however, avoids exposing readers to this theory and allows the history to unfold in a nonbiased manner. He waits until the conclusion of his book to offer suggestions for future media researchers framed around the history he presents and research he undertook.

Malin divides the book into five chapters, using the first four to illustrate how new technologies in the early 20th century shaped and influenced our communications and interactions, as well as stimulated cultural anxieties about immigration, race, class, and gender through marketing schemes and

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technological ideology. The final chapter provides contemporary examples to show how these "narrow technological views" are still in play today and the author attempts to modify the media physicalist understanding of emotion by considering its broader implications.

Malin primarily focuses on the arguments of people in positions of power because they "create a set of dominant cultural expectations against which our own emotional and technological displays are likely to be judged" (p. 22). Beginning with the telegraph in the 1800s to the technological inductions of the present day, he cites sources that found new media to be an obstacle to our connections with each other or an improvement because "both technological naysayers and celebrants seem to maintain the connection between more powerful technologies and more powerful expressions of emotion, with more advanced technologies getting us closer to our emotional hell, or heaven, respectively" (p. 6).

Malin uses the telegraph to first expose this contradiction of ideas surrounding new technology. Seen as a way to "unite the world in one common heart" by some and feared for its supposed ability to "destroy local communities and neighborhoods" (p. 6) by others, this nineteenth-century mechanism carried with it sublime powers as it transported people's thoughts and emotions over the wires.

When the telegraph initially came into use, "emotions could still be both public and powerful without necessarily being seen as dangerous" (p. 40). It was celebrated for its ability to evoke passion, grouped in the same category as elocutionists and religious revivals. But Malin explains that:

As the United States expanded its communication technologies in the early 20th century, social researchers, clergy, educators, businesspeople, and numerous others increasingly stressed the private, individual aspects of emotion. For reasons of both social welfare and personal gain, people were encouraged more and more to keep their emotions to themselves. This reflected changing attitudes about both human feelings and the technologies that communicated them. (p. 49)

Malin continues his historical study into this early 20th century period by exploring the connection between human feeling and the stereoscope, "a binocular viewing apparatus through which two nearly identical, side-by-side photographs produce a single 'three-dimensional' image" (p. 73). This new technology was thought to actually transfer a person into the picture they were looking at, creating a reality effect and impacting emotion. Malin explains that companies published educational books about the stereoscope, claiming that, "stereoscopic travel was just as emotionally enlightening as the real thing" (p. 84) and several researchers utilized its three-dimensional imagery thought to make ideas more tangible. As Malin puts it, "The power of stereoscopic technology, the argument went, came directly from its capacity to transmit not only images but feelings" (p. 24).

How a person should express those feelings is Malin's next historical juncture. In chapter 3, he discusses public speaking and the emotional control encouraged by new media such as radio broadcastings, phonograph recordings, and x-ray images. Researchers, speech specialists, and doctors used these and a number of self-invented technological mechanisms to study speech, determining where emotion came from and how people could regulate it to avoid hyperemotional practices.

The early twentieth-century work of [Carl] Seashore and other speech researchers arose amid concerns for controlling the dangers of emotional stimulation of the voice and body. In locating the emotions of speech in a series of laboratory apparatuses, the new speech seemed to free both speaker and scholar alike from the emotional disturbances of the new media age. (p. 127)

Malin says radio announcers especially heightened anxieties about emotion and speech, which led to a set of requirements modeled after this "new speech." The radio announcer eventually became the exemplar of "the emotionally controlled life with technology to which each American was supposed to aspire" (p. 25), and he "created a fairly narrow picture of the ideal citizen of the new technological era—one overwhelmingly male, middle-class, and white" (p. 146).

Scientists then began studying this citizen and the emotional effects media had on him, particularly with motion pictures. Malin primarily focuses on the Payne Fund motion picture studies conducted by Christian Ruckmick and Wendell Dysinger:

Caught up in a culture of emotional control, the Payne Fund motion picture studies—and Dysinger and Ruckmick's work in particular—had sought to ferret out the emotional excess of mass culture. Dysinger and Ruckmick had also taken aim at the excessive emotions of social science itself, pushing for more quantitative, impersonal research that had taken hold in the early twentieth century. (p. 194)

Malin uses Dysinger and Ruckmick's neurological research to transition into the 21st century, connecting their studies, beliefs, and research methods to the ones currently employed today.

Like the studies of Christian Rickmick, who used electrical film recording technologies to understand the emotional effects of film, much contemporary research is using digital technologies to make sense of the emotional effects of digital technologies. (p. 199)

In doing so, Malin argues, journalists, scientists, and researchers are "pushing aside a range of philosophical, ethical and more broadly social questions in favor of a more narrowly individualistic conception of media audience" (p. 194).

Malin attempts to resituate media physicalism by presenting evidence surrounding the importance of cultural, ethical, and disciplinary concerns when researching media's effects on emotion. He concludes his book by pushing for a more broad-based study on media effects that includes these elements and takes the historical context into consideration.

As I have suggested throughout, I believe that our discussions about how communication technologies advance our emotional lives have much to tell us about how we understand our world and ourselves...How we connect to each other and the potential problems and possibilities of these connections pose extremely powerful ethical, moral, and political questions . . . I believe our conversations will be more productive, useful,

and critically reflexive when we make these political and ethical points more explicit. For me, this means tying our ideas to the larger climate in which they take place, noting who is empowered and disempowered by them, and doing our best to reformulate them to help those they disadvantage. (p. 248)

The amount of research Malin undertook in writing *Feeling Mediate* is evident in the vast number of scientific studies and arguments he presents. His final chapter efficiently situates the early 20th century formation of media physicalism within the present context of digital media. And the methodological changes he suggests seem appropriate based upon the historical data he collects and analyzes. In offering a solution to media researchers, Malin also offers audiences a way to understand their own emotional process in relation to new technologies, which makes this book a worthwhile read for anyone who communicates with a "feeling machine."